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## ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORDS AS EVIDENCE OF SOCIAL DIFFERENCES: THE DEDICATORS OF ROMAN EPIGRAPHIC MONUMENTS IN THE VICINITY OF THERMAL SPRINGS IN SERBIA

### ABSTRACT

*Thermal springs have always represented a prominent feature in a geographical and social environment and, especially during Antiquity, their presence was often a stimulus for the development of settlements and sanctuaries. Regarding the Roman epigraphic monuments found in the surroundings of thermal springs in Serbia, which are nowadays still associated with health resorts, there are only a modest number of examples. On this occasion, we analysed their inscriptions, which, along with the materials of production such as porphyry or marble, show that the dedicators were mostly members of the upper social class, from the ranks of state officials (Mediana), beneficiarii consularis (Novopazarska Banja) or priests (Kuršumlijska Banja). Nevertheless, this certainly does not exclude the possibility that members of the lower social categories also used the therapeutic properties of water; probably worshipping the same iatric deities, which raises the question as to how suitable the reconstruction of phenomena like these religious-health practices places may be using only such material remains.*

**KEYWORDS: DEDICATORS, SOCIAL STATUS, ASCLEPIUS, THERMAL SPRINGS, IATRIC DEITIES, ROMAN CULTS.**

### INTRODUCTION

Although, from an archaeological perspective, the discoveries of material culture cannot be used to reconstruct the physical context itself as a frame for the establishment of social relationships, they can still be perceived as the materialisation of certain components of the social past. This is particularly evident when examining cultures with long continuity that have been exposed to traditional models of behaviour, implying that the advancement in social status is necessarily reflected through the materialisation of higher quality. On this occasion, an example of such social diversity in the Roman Empire can be found through the

analysis of the status and function of the dedicators of votive monuments in the surroundings of the thermal springs on the territory of Serbia.<sup>1</sup>

Thermal springs have always represented a strong feature in the geographical and social environment, and very frequently the presence of this type of spring was the stimulus for the development of settlements and sanctuaries (Croon 1967: 225–226). Among the ancient Greeks, the thermal

<sup>1</sup> We note that the topic “*Social status of the dedicators of Roman votive monuments in the environment of thermal springs in Serbia*” was presented by the authors of this paper at the conference “*Serbian Archeology between Theory and Facts IX*”, held at the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade in April 2022.

waters were considered sacred, and it was believed that the springs were protected by certain deities such as Asclepius and Hygieia, Heracles and Hephaestus, while evidence of the cult of Artemis and Apollo was also often recorded near such springs. The Romans accepted a similar practice, so the cults of healing deities were spread throughout the entire territory of the Roman Empire. One of the most popular was the cult of the god Asclepius, who was Romanised<sup>2</sup> in the Roman period and worshipped mainly in small and private temples (Љубомировић и Радуловић 2021: 140–148).

It is noticeable that a large number of dedications to Asclepius in the territory of the Roman Empire come from dedicators in military circles because they were not only connected with Asclepius through his healing powers, but also prayed to this deity in order to find lost items or to achieve victory (Renberg 2007: 116–117). Additionally, despite Asclepius' primary role to ensure or recover the health of his worshipers, he was at the same time the protector and guardian of households, and seen as the protector of the emperor's well-being as well as his entire family (Edelstein and Edelstein 1998: 104). This could be one of the reasons why the dedications to him, as well as to other deities that are generally located near healing thermal springs, came very often from upper social class dedicators.

## ROMAN EPIGRAPHIC MONUMENTS FROM THE VICINITY OF THERMAL SPRINGS ON THE TERRITORY OF SERBIA

Regarding the Roman epigraphic monuments found in the surroundings of thermal springs in Serbia, which are nowadays often associated with modern spa resorts, there are just a modest number of finds: two votive statuettes with inscriptions from *Mediana*, and votive monuments from Krupac, Novopazarska Banja and Kuršumlijska Banja (Figure 1).

<sup>2</sup> It is believed that the cult of Asclepius reached Rome in 293 BC because of the need to cure people from the plague and to stop the further spread of the disease. Consequently, Sibyl's oracle was consulted, which suggested building a temple dedicated to this new deity in Rome (Edelstein and Edelstein 1998: 185).



**Figure 1.** Thermal spring sites in Serbia where votive reliefs were found (map by Nataša Miladinović, National Museum Kruševac).

### *Inscriptions dedicated to iatric deities from Mediana*

The site of *Mediana* was certainly connected to the healing springs in the nearby Niška Banja, and the users of the thermal baths within the palace complex probably benefited from this healing water, which was easy to transport thanks to the natural fall of the terrain (Љубомировић и Радуловић 2021:152).<sup>3</sup> As support to this claim, there are numerous finds of monuments dedicated to iatric deities, among which two porphyry statuettes, votive gifts to Asclepius and Hygieia, stand out (Figures 2 and 3).<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, both are

<sup>3</sup> Based on archaeological material, it was confirmed that the thermal springs in Niška Banja were probably in use since the time of Antoninus Pius (Јовановић 1975: 63).

<sup>4</sup> Representations of Asclepius and Hygieia were also found on the bronze railing discovered during the archaeological excavations of *Mediana* in 2000. It is assumed that it was brought on the orders of Emperor Julian, who was a great admirer of the god Sol (Helios), as well as Asclepius, during his stay in *Naissus* in 361. The part of the railing that was found during excavations had probably been hidden in 378 due to the invasion of the Goths (Vasić 2004; Vasić



**Figure 2.** Statuette of Asclepius, from *Mediana* (Narodni muzej Niš 2023a).



**Figure 3.** Statuette of Hygieia, from *Mediana* (Narodni muzej Niš 2023b).

fragmentarily preserved, so Asclepius is lacking a head and part of one arm, while being preserved at a height of 43 cm. His figure is bare-chested, covered from the waist with a long dress and a cloak draped over the back, while sandals with straps can be seen on the feet. The rectangular base of this statuette has a Greek inscription dedicated to the mentioned deity by a certain *Roimetalcus*

and his wife *Philippa*.<sup>5</sup> The statue of Hygieia was also made of porphyry and discovered in a fragmented state at a preserved height of 46 cm, with a dedication in Greek. She is dressed in a long dress with a cape over it while a snake is wrapped around her right arm. The Greek dedication on the statue's base is devoted to Hygieia and mentions the same dedicator as on the Asclepius statuette<sup>6</sup> (Јовановић, 1975: 57, 60; Vasić 2018: 94–95, 97).

Regarding the base inscriptions of these statuettes, it was pointed out that the name itself and the Greek language of the dedication certainly indicate that these sculptures originate from the territory dominated by the Thracians (Јовановић 1975: 60). They may have been brought to *Mediana* for a specific reason, possibly for a sanctuary dedicated to Asclepius during the reign of Julian, though they were made in Egypt earlier, probably during the Tetrarchy period (Vasić 2018: 97, 105).<sup>7</sup> Similar dedications to Asclepius and Hygieia are rarely found in the Roman Balkan provinces, while in the period of Late Antiquity, they were widespread in eastern Greece but not frequent in the western provinces (Petrović 1979: 9596, no.59; Марић 2003: 63).<sup>8</sup> The title of the dedicator on these sculptures indicates that he was of an upper social status, perhaps a high-ranking official in imperial service (Petrović 1979: 97, no. 61).<sup>9</sup> Additionally, since the name *Roimetalcus*, as well as his title, were erased from Hygieia's statuette, it is considered that he could not be the owner of the villa in *Mediana*, but that the owner himself wanted to perform a kind of *damnatio memoriae* in order to use these sculptures in the newly established sanctuary (Vasić 2018: 97, note 56).

<sup>5</sup> According to the reconstruction of P. Petrović (1979: 95, no. 59) it can be read as follows:

Σωτήρι Ἀσκληπιῶ Ροιμητάλκης καὶ ἡ σύμ | βιος Φιλίππα  
εὐ | ξάμενοι ἀνέθηχ[αν]

<sup>6</sup> The text of the inscription is: Υγιείᾳ Ροιμητάλκης | ὁ διαση(μότατος) καὶ ἡ σύμβιος Φιλίππα εὐξάμηνοι  
ἀνέθηκαν (after Petrović 1979: 97, no. 61).

<sup>7</sup> This can be confirmed by the palaeographic characteristics of the inscriptions (Petrović 1979: no. 59, 61).

<sup>8</sup> Sculptures depicting Asclepius and Hygieia are also rarely found in the territory of Upper Moesia (Tomović 1993: 95, no. 101, 96, no. 107, 97, no. 109, 117, no. 185).

<sup>9</sup> In previous literature, it has been discussed whether the dedicant of these statuettes could be identified as *Valerius Rometalca, dux Aegypti*, but this has largely been dismissed (Vasić 2005).

### *The votive relief from Krupac*

The mound in Krupac was first explored at the beginning of the 20th century, but no significant discoveries were made at that time (Васић 1910: 270, 273). In later literature, the Mogila tumulus from Krupac was mentioned in connection with the finds of Roman bricks, but special attention was drawn to the finding of a votive relief with a representation of two Thracian riders (Петровић 1966: 250; Тонев 1933: 316–317; Геров 1969: 169, 183; Георгиев 1977: 68). In the documentation of the Museum of Ponišavlje, it is recorded that it was found in 1953, while its exact location is registered as the so-called Krupačko blato (*eng.* mud) i.e., the southern side of the Krupačko lake, which is located in Veliko selo (Пејић 2015: 202, фус. 28). It is also important to note that the remains of Roman buildings, parts of water and sewage pipes, mosaics and other movable archaeological material was discovered near the location of this relief.

It is a votive plate made of fine-grained marble, quadrangular in shape with a length of 34 cm, a width of 25 cm, and a thickness of 4 cm. In the bordered upper field, one can see a scene made in shallow relief showing two figures on horses in motion, facing each other. The horsemen are dressed in chitons that flutter behind them, while both figures hold a flat object in their left or right hands (*patra?*). Between them there is a tree with a snake wrapped around it, while under it there is an altar (**Figure 4**). On the lower part of the plate below the representation of the deities, there is a three-line inscription in Greek.<sup>10</sup>

From the inscription we can discover that *Gaius*, the son of *Proclus*, dedicated this votive relief to Apollo and Asclepius with the epithet *Berakel-nos*, fulfilling the given vow, which confirms that the two riders represent the aforementioned deities (Гавриловић-Витас 2021: 179; Вельковић и Васиљевић 2022: 4). In the opinion of P. Petrović, this relief is an example of the cult syncretism of the Dioscuri and the Thracian horseman, because the inscription is dedicated to the iatric deities



**Figure 4.** Votive relief, from Krupac (Muzej Ponišavlja Pirot).

Apollo and Asclepius, while the Dioscuri were also given significant healing powers (Петровић 1964-1965: 250).<sup>11</sup>

The epithet that appears in the dedication – Βερακελήνοις, represents a unique example that has not been discovered on any other monument to date. According to the analogy with the find from the Glava Panega site in Bulgaria, the second part of the epithet Βερακελήνός i.e., κελήνός, could mean “to flow, spring up” (Петровић 1966: 250).<sup>12</sup> Therefore, it was assumed that this epithet was in connection with the ancient name of the settlement, as a toponym related to a thermal spring, namely a spa used in the Roman period (Петровић 1966: 249; Јовановић 1980: 7). This is supported by the previously mentioned presence of water and sewage pipes as possible proof of the use of the water from the thermal spring, while the votive plaque, dedicated to iatric deities, testifies to the cultic importance of this place.

### *The votive altar from Novopazarska Banja*

Novopazarska Banja is located on the main

<sup>11</sup> In the western area of Philippopolis, dedications to gods with such a meaning are very common, while the most significant sanctuary of the Thracian rider in the area of Philippopolis is the one in Batkun, where around 250 votive reliefs and statues dedicated to Asclepius were found (Boteva 2011: 86).

<sup>12</sup> Βερακεληνος can also mean “white spring” (Georgiev 1975: 25–26; Георгиев 1977: 49, 68, 178); Likewise, a new interpretation of this toponym was recently based on the Thracian translation for “dark spring” or “muddy spring”, since the mentioned thermo-mineral spring is located near the Krupac swamp, which is created by releasing water from it (Вельковић и Васиљевић 2022: 9).

<sup>10</sup> According to the reconstruction of P. Petrović (1966: 249–250) it can be read as follows:

Ἀπόλλωνι καὶ Ἀσκληπιῷ Βερακελήνοις Γάιος Προκλου εὐξάμενος ἄνιθηρι

road from Belgrade via Novi Pazar to Adriatic coast, 3 kilometres northeast of Novi Pazar. Within the settlement there are several thermo-mineral springs, belonging to a group of sulphur baths (Гајић 2003). The remains of two smaller temples were discovered there (Јовановић 1995: 62–63), which are directly connected to the nearby mineral springs and the older sacral tradition of this place. Several votive monuments were also found, of which the most important is one dedicated to Jupiter and the local genius of mineral springs (Марић 1954-1955: 357–358). This monument was made of sandstone, with the following dimensions: height 84 cm, width 32 cm, thickness 28 cm. It is profiled and decorated with carved representations of vine leaves and today is kept in the National Museum in Kragujevac. It is dated to the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. Its dedicator is mentioned as *Marcus Ucentius, beneficiarius consularis* of the legion VII *Claudiae*.<sup>13</sup>

Regarding this dedication, the question of the local deity that was revered here, possibly with certain iatric properties, may remain open. Also, there is the dilemma as to whether the dedicator himself, who probably served there, was well acquainted with the local cults or not.

### *The votive altars from Kuršumlijska Banja*

Kuršumlijska Banja is a town settlement and spa resort in the administrative district of Toplica, with several sources of carbonated mineral water (Бојовић 2010: 214–215). Roman bricks and walls, as well as a silver *denarius* of Emperor Philip the Arab, were found there during the construction of the bath at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Ризнић 1884: 83).<sup>14</sup> In 1884, a votive monument was discovered near Kuršumlijska Banja, in the cemetery of the village of Bunjaci, which was later transferred to the lapidarium of the Na-

<sup>13</sup> The inscription text reads as follows (after Марић 1956: 357–358):

*I(ovi) O(ptimo) M(aximo) ceterisque dis deabus huiusce loci pro salute domini(i) nostril M. Ucentius b(ene)ff(iciarius) c(onsularis) l(egions) VII Cl(audiae) v(otum) s(olvit)*

<sup>14</sup> The importance of these thermal springs during Antiquity is represented by an epigraphic monument dedicated to *Dea Dardanica*, which was discovered in 1937 in Kuršumlijska Banja. Its inscription confirms the name of the Roman settlement in Kuršumlijska Banja, in the abbreviated form as *Aquar(um) Bas...* (Petrović 1995: 104).



**Figure 5.** Votive relief, from Kuršumlijska Banja (after Вулић и Премерштајн 1900: 25).

tional Museum in Belgrade (Валтровић 1884: 12; Premerstein und Vulić 1900: 127).

It is a votive altar dedicated to healing nymphs, protectors of thermal springs (**Figure 5**).<sup>15</sup> The altar is made of grey tuff, with the following dimensions: height 80 cm, width 41 cm, thickness 37 cm, with the inscription field measuring 47 by 37 cm. According to one opinion, the monument could have been made at the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, while the dedication to the nymphs clearly indicates that the thermal springs were used at the time of the Romans (Вулић и Премерштајн 1900: 25). Additionally, the dedicator of the monument, *Catius Celer*, who devoted the monument together with his wife and sons, was probably the *pontifex* of Ulpiana. However, there is a different opinion regarding the dating, whereby the monument is connected to the reign of Gordian III, de-

<sup>15</sup> According to Premerstein and Vulić (1900:127), the reconstruction of the text reads as follows:

*Nymphis Salutaribus [...] Catius Cele[r] pontifex (?) [2-3] [L]ucilla coiug(e) [et] Lucio et Sexto (!) filiiis*

terminated in the second quarter of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century (Јовановић 2003: 36). Additionally, there was an assumption that the dedicator might have been related to *Lucius Cattius Celerus*, a state officer of high rank who erected the monument in honour of Gordian in *Timacum Minus* in 242, on behalf of the II Dardanian cohort. However, as his name was not recorded elsewhere, that connection at first remained hypothetical. Still, the final confirmation that it is the same person was provided by the discovery of a milestone from the area of *Ad Fines*, found in 1875 on the threshold of the church of St. Nikola in Kuršumljica. The inscription bears the name of *L. Cattius Celer*, with the title that belongs to him, *legatus Augusti propraetore* (Петровић 2007: 92–93).

## CONCLUSION

From the above-mentioned considerations, it can be noted that the Roman inscriptions in the vicinity of thermal springs in Serbia indicate how the benefits of healing waters were primarily used by members of the upper social ranks. Through such monuments, they probably expressed gratitude to the deities whose patronage enabled their healing or good health. Consequently, most of the dedicators whose social status was recorded on these monuments, as a rule, belonged to state officials (*Mediana*), *beneficarii consularis* (Novopazarska Banja), or priests (Kuršumlijska Banja).

However, this certainly does not exclude the possibility that members of the lower social categories used the therapeutic benefits of thermal springs as well, probably worshiping the same iatric deities. Therefore, given that these places are typically associated with cults in the literature, the question arises as to how appropriate it is to recreate phenomena like these religious-health practices through such material remains. Moreover, this can be additionally indicated by the fact that most authors agree that the cult of Asclepius enjoyed exceptional popularity because all people, regardless of race, social status or age, were welcome in his sanctuaries, as well as that the cult of this deity embodied constant benevolence towards people who would turn to him for help (Wells 1998: 15).<sup>16</sup> In addition, it is necessary to

ask to what extent it is even possible to understand the cultic practice related to the respect of deities and their iatric properties in the environment of thermal springs in our territory, since no other typical finds, like votive gifts in the form of diseased body parts, have been recorded in the mentioned places (Vasić 2018: 98). In our opinion, the only appropriate method to gain a more detailed insight into the healing practices in these specific sites is to insist on the relevant archaeological context as the proper source of concrete knowledge.<sup>17</sup> We believe this is a very important issue that should be given more attention in further studies of similar phenomena in Roman culture.

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also medical care centres (Garantzioti, Nikolaos and Manoutsoglou 2019: 530).

<sup>17</sup> This issue is complicated by the fact that, except for the finds from *Mediana*, the presented monuments were not found during systematic archaeological excavations. These are mostly monuments published in older literature that provided scarce information about the conditions of their discovery. In this case, it is certainly necessary to re-examine whether it is possible to talk about existing cult places with organised rituals or if it is a question of isolated dedications. One of the possible solutions for this could be a future revision of the results of all conducted archaeological campaigns in their immediate or wider surroundings, as a possibility for a closer reconstruction of their exact context.

<sup>16</sup> The Asclepieia were not only temples of worship but

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**REZIME**

**ARHEOLOŠKI ZAPISI KAO SVEDOČANSTVA SOCIJALNIH RAZLIKA: DEDIKANTI RIMSKIH EPIGRAFSKIH SPOMENIKA U BLIZINI LEKOVITIH IZVORA U SRBIJI**

**KLJUČNE REČI: DEDIKANTI, DRUŠTVENI STATUS, ASKLEPIJE. LEKOVITI IZVORI, IJATRIČKA BOŽANSTVA, RIMSKI KULTOVI.**

Iako otkrića materijalne kulture ne mogu rekonstruisati sam fizički kontekst za uspostavljanje socijalnih relacija, mogu se percipirati kao emanacija određenih komponenti društvene prošlosti. Na primeru kultura koje su, poput rimske, dugo trajale i obilovale tradicionalnim modelima ponašanja, posebno je uočljivo da se napredovanje u društvenom statusu uglavnom iskazivalo kroz materijalizaciju višeg kvaliteta. Upravo takvo društveno raslojavanje u Rimskom carstvu ovom prilikom smo sagledali analizirajući položaje dedikanata spomenika posvećenih ијатричким божанstvima u okruženju lekovitih izvora na teritoriji Srbije.

Naime, postojanje lekovitih izvora oduvek je davalo snažan pečat geografskom i društvenom okruženju, te je tokom antičkog perioda prisustvo ovog tipa vrela često predstavljalo podsticaj za razvoj naselja i svetilišta, ponekad sa lečilištima. U pogledu rimskih epigrafskih spomenika, nađenih u mestima koja se i danas dovode u vezu sa banjama na našem tlu, radi se o nevelikom broju primeraka: dve statuete sa natpisima iz Medijane, zatim jednom spomeniku iz Krupca, kao i votivnim arama iz Novopazarske i Kuršumlijske Banje. Njihove posvete, uz materijale izrade kao što su porfir i mermer, otkrivaju da su ovde dedikanti uglavnom bili pripadnici viših društvenih slojeva iz redova državnih (carskih?) činovnika (Medijana), beneficijarnih konzulara (Novopazarska Banja) ili sveštenika (Kuršumlijska Banja). Takva situacija, međutim, svakako ne isključuje mogućnost da su i pripadnici nižeg socijalnog statusa koristili lekovitost vode i poštovali iste bogove ијатричког карактера. Usled toga, nameće se pitanje koliko je rekonstrukcija fenomena poput

ovakvih religiozno-zdravstvenih praksi putem pomenutih materijalnih ostataka zapravo adekvatna, budući da se u literaturi ta mesta uglavnom označavaju kao kulturna. Na to dodatno može ukazati i činjenica vezana za poštovanje boga Asklepija, koja govori da se većina autora slaže da je izuzetna popularnost njegovog kulta zasnovana na tome da su svi ljudi bez obzira na rasu, socijalni status ili godine bili dobrodošli u njegovim svetištim, odnosno da je kult ovog božanstva tradicionalno činila benevolentnost prema ljudima kojima je bila potrebna pomoć. Aktualizaciju tog problema naglašava i to što na ovim lokalitetima za sada nisu nađeni i drugi votivni darovi tipični za poštovanje pomenutih božanstava u datom okruženju. Stoga smatramo da je insistiranje na odgovarajućem arheološkom kontekstu, posebno u pogledu nekih budućih istraživanja, trenutno jedini put ka nešto pouzdanijim saznanjima o takvim kulturnim praksama na našoj teritoriji.

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